

FT View

Foot in the mouth?

FOOT and Mouth Disease (FMD) is spreading rapidly in Sri Lanka, raising huge concerns for the dairy industry and the welfare of the public. According to reports, the disease is spreading rapidly around Polonnaruwa, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, Puttalam, Ampara and Vavuniya, causing significant havoc.

Regional authorities have taken steps to ban the transport and sale of meat as well as attempting to protect the central region where dairy production is at its highest. Experts have also called for the expensive dairy cows imported with the aim of making Sri Lanka self-sufficient in milk to be vaccinated as early as possible to protect their stock. Over 3m600 animals have already been identified as infected, while many others could either be infected or carrying the virus unknowingly.

Obviously, FMD has severe implications for animal farming, since it is highly infectious and can be spread by air as well as through contact with contaminated farming equipment, vehicles, clothing or feed. Its containment demands considerable efforts in vaccination, strict monitoring, trade restrictions and quarantines, and occasionally the killing of animals. But this is not necessarily foolproof because the virus is genetically highly variable, which limits the effectiveness of vaccination.

The silver lining is undoubtedly the fact that FMD is rarely fatal to humans. FMD is sensitive to stomach acid, so it cannot spread to humans via consumption of infected meat, except in the mouth before the meat is swallowed. In the UK, the last confirmed human case occurred in 1966 and only a few other cases have been recorded in countries of continental Europe, Africa, and South America. Symptoms of FMD in humans include malaise, fever, vomiting, red ulcerative lesions and small blisters on the skin. Aware of these unpleasant effects, large numbers of the public have limited themselves to poultry, but greater awareness needs to be made both to protect and prevent panic among the masses.

Online sources detail that epidemics of FMD have resulted in the slaughter of millions of animals, despite this being a frequently nonfatal disease for adult animals (2-5% mortality), though young animals can have a high mortality. The destruction of animals is primarily to halt further spread, as growth and milk production may be permanently affected, even in animals that have recovered. Due to international efforts to eradicate the disease, infection would also lead to trade bans being imposed on affected countries.

Critics of current policies to cull infected herds argue that the financial imperative needs to be balanced against the killing of many animals, especially when a significant proportion of infected animals, most notably those producing milk, would recover from infection and live normal lives, albeit with reduced milk production. However, culling is generally practiced to stop the spread of the disease which otherwise could become systemic.

With hundreds of farmers facing the possibility of losing their livelihoods and being set back financially for years, it is clear that the Government needs to put its full weight behind controlling this situation. In fact it will also need to invest significantly in not just financial compensation but regular testing, larger and competent vet services, loan schemes to resume business and greater understanding of how outbreaks can happen.

The industry also needs regulation so the public knows that what they are eating is safe, a standardisation program so the whole sector can be managed competently. Given the immense investment already made to improve milk production, it is now time for protection.

Time for a Presidential Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy

SRI Lanka has once again come under the microscope of the international community. The image of Sri Lanka has been and is being tortured by the global media organisations worldwide.

With the advent of the internet and online media, there has been a steady increase in the proliferation of news websites. The pro-separatist lobby seems to have made inroads into global media and adverse news reports have been and are being aired by the global media organisations. It would be an uphill task for Sri Lanka to counter each and every news story that is being hatched by the pro-separatist lobby.

The biggest canard that has been successfully floated against Sri Lanka was that there is a genocide Sri Lanka. This slogan gained currency when the country went in flames in 1983 as most of the diplomatic missions of Sri Lanka were being manned by diplomats from the minority Tamil population and their kith and kin were being targeted by the rampaging mobs and Tamil properties were being looted and destroyed.

The Government in power then did little to contain the growing violence upon innocent Tamils and it took days to declare a state of emergency in Sri Lanka then. All these actions had a very negative impact overseas.

The then Leader of the Opposition later Amirthalingam had a field day marketing the Tamil cause worldwide and the central plank on which the propaganda was based was that there was a systematic killing of Tamils in Sri Lanka and the apt word used was 'genocide'. This much-maligned word has since been used by all separatist activists and unfortunately the Sri Lankan diplomatic missions overseas have not been able to dilute the impact of this word.

This writer had the privilege of watching a television debate about the post-victory political developments in Sri Lanka on an Indian national TV channel as recently as 2013, where the learned panellist were using the same word 'genocide' even now to describe the situation in Sri Lanka.

There has got to be a concerted effort by the Government of Sri Lanka to debunk this misconception and Sri Lanka needs a paradigm shift in its policy towards countering the international media. The Government must mobilise all resources at its command to organise an advisory commission comprising individuals who are versed

in public diplomacy, strategic communications in order to advise the President of Sri Lanka on strategies that need to be adopted in countering adverse media reports about Sri Lanka.

Public diplomacy for Sri Lanka

The people of Sri Lanka are now enjoying the peace dividends thanks to the political leadership displayed by President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his brother Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa. If not for this great patriotic victory, we would still be under the clutches of the brutal terrorists. The diplomacy and the tenacity displayed by the President Rajapaksa in annihilating the LTTE amidst international pressure were unprecedented in contemporary politics and deserve commendation by the entire nation.

Now a new game of war is being waged overseas, targeting the leadership of our country. It is highly unlikely that the separatists would abandon their struggle for autonomy or the propaganda against Sri Lanka when another government comes to power. It therefore behooves on all citizens to contribute financially and morally, or provide their talents in defending the country. Countering foreign media and hiring lobbyist overseas are a costly business and citizen participation is therefore imperative and must be officially mobilised.

Secretary to the President Lalith Weeraratna, an experienced public servant, seems to have undertaken the battle in Geneva this time. This is a battle in which every citizen must take part. This writer believes that the country requires the talents of the citizens who could articulate the policy alternatives and other snippets on public diplomacy. Sri Lanka is also being demonised by the State Government in Tamil Nadu and there is a greater need for public diplomacy initiatives targeting the Tamil Nadu population as well.

What exactly is public diplomacy?

Official diplomacy is about conducting political, economic and cultural relations between governments through diplomatic missions where public participation is not solicited and diplomatic communications are conducted often in secret. There is no need for public to know the communications between governments unless the governments themselves involved provide

information to the public. The vast majority of the public does not even know the topics of discussions between governments.

Public diplomacy is little known and it is also called the 'soft power' using communications tools to create a wider public awareness about a certain causes in an effort to mould public opinion. Public diplomacy is often complimentary to official diplomacy.

Public diplomacy was first articulated by Edward Murrow, the then Head of the US Information Service (USIS), which is now replaced by Voice of America (VOA), but other agencies of the US Government are vigorously following the concept advanced by Edward Murrow. According to Murrow, "Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that it involves interaction not only with governments but primarily with non-governmental individuals and organisations. Furthermore public diplomacy activities often present many differing views represented by private individuals and organisations in addition to official government views."

Public diplomacy requires citizen participation along with government efforts.

The Foreign Policy Centre, a UK-based independent think-tank founded by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, has identified three dimensions of public diplomacy:

(1) Increase people's familiarity with one's country (making them think about it, updating their images, turning around unfavourable opinions)

(2) Increasing people's appreciation of one's country (creating positive perceptions, getting others to see issues of global importance from the same perspective)

(3) Engaging people with one's country (strengthening ties from education reform to scientific cooperation; encouraging people to see us as an attractive destination for tourism, study, getting to buy our products, getting to understand and subscribe to our values)

Why is lobbying required?

Media reports indicate that a resolution against Sri Lanka will be moved by US where there is an organised political system captured by the interest groups. Washington DC is the epicentre of world's lobbying industry and billions of dollars

are involved in lobbying industry contracts. Washington DC has a unique system of political activism and provides a forum for advocacy groups to engage legislators on policy issues. This industry has grown over the years and no individual or an organisation can approach US legislators without an intermediary from the lobbying industry. Political influence plays a crucial role in shaping policy through legislation.

The US economy is the largest economy in the world and trillions of dollars are involved in government budget allocations and the bigger the slice, the bigger the contracts for private organisations. In order to secure a bigger slice, there has to be a justification and this requires sound reasoning. The private entities are therefore tempted to hire experienced and influential lobbyists in Washington DC to reason with US legislators so that legislative policy could be formed in favour of certain private entities.

There are thousands of lobbying organisations in Washington DC and it is important the Government of Sri Lanka to select the right lobbyist to garner support from US Congress. There have been efforts by the Government to hire lobbyists which is an essential exercise as the political process in Washington DC cannot be penetrated by the Embassy of Sri Lanka in Washington DC alone. There has to be a concerted effort not only in Washington DC but in London, Montreal and Brussels.

Israel is the only country which has successfully lobbied the US Congress. The American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has a permanent office in Washington DC primarily targeting US legislators and provides timely and updated information to the US legislators and undertakes many programs aimed at boosting relations between Israel and the US. There are other Jewish organisations with political influence being engaged in promoting US-Israel relations. Sri Lanka can learn many lessons from the Israel lobby.

Presidential advisory committee

It is high time a Presidential advisory committee was set up so as to advise the President of Sri Lanka on the strategies that need to be adopted in countering the separatist agendas overseas. The committee must comprise experts in the field of public diplomacy, strategic communications and psychological warfare.

(The writer is a freelance journalist and a political lobbying and public affairs consultant. He is a member of the American Association of Political Consultants.)

Guest Column



By Srinath Fernando

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A planeload of defenders!

delegates to the UN human rights sessions in Geneva will pull out of their hats to counter the impending resolution on Sri Lanka. All of them are surely not going to address that august gathering.

If they were to follow the native logic of our old farmer, each member of the delegation has a very specialised function.

The speaker who walks on to the podium will only be giving expression to the arguments thought out by the different members of the team, each a recognised specialist carrying in his head an impressive store of knowledge on a designated subject.

Although the old farmer has a different perception of a legal proceeding, we know that the dialectical process inherent in a court room drama does not depend on the number of lawyers on one side or the other. Neither should the seniority of the counsel nor his various connections matter.

No strange phenomenon

These may vary from vote buying to surgical strikes with no collateral damage. One may stray on to the domain of the other only at the risk of earning the label of a dabbler or worse.

Guest Column



By Ravi Perera

the responsibilities of others, entrusted with the humdrum tasks. Each function is not only defined in this manner but also given a certain value in a hierarchical sense. A Brahmin cannot put his hand to the plough without shame. If you want to understand the popular image of a 'boss,' watch any of our tele-dramas; long-sleeved shirt, tie, measured talk, thoughtful demeanour, all very cranky, limited and obviously contrived.

A winning argument is purely a question of rationality and intelligence, of course provided the facts and the law favour one's cause. However imprecise its definition or faulty its outcome sometimes, the ultimate end of a judicial process is justice, for each and for all.

But maybe a recipient culture does not see it that way. Invariably, a culture not in tune with the essence of the adopted system views it through what is visible, its physical manifestations. The numbers

of lawyers in their robes and gowns, the chauffeur-driven car of the professional, and the minions running around the boss represent the system to them.

It matters not whether the spirit of the system or the minutia of its workings are understood in its completeness, so long as we know enough to run a copy. Since the pretence of a system is acceptable, the semblance of a system or rather the mimic thereof suffices.

Good governance obsession

So we go to Geneva proclaiming loudly, "Please, we have our own systems, our own leaders and our own ways of doing things, so do not interfere, thank you"

The fact that we have to even argue on these lines perhaps reflects the reality that there is no unanimity on these matters as we would wish for. As much as the issue of human rights abuses, there appears to be a concern among some countries about the quality of our institutions and the leadership thereof. It is widely-accepted today that periodic elections alone do not make a democracy. After all, even Hitler was elected to power. If elections were the only factor, Hosni Mubarak

of Egypt would be a shining example of a democratic ruler. In Geneva we will argue that we have an independent Judiciary with no pressure on our judges to toe the line of the Government. Our investigative apparatus, the Police, watchdog institutions and the media, are free to investigate and expose any wrongdoing with no fear whatsoever. The public service is independent of any kind of undue influence or coercion in the exercise of their duties. As far as possible the machinery of the Government works in a fair and transparent manner. We are a democracy where the people elect their rulers through an open and fair electoral process. And above all, the people of this country have proven their political maturity as well as democratic instincts over and over again. An old culture has given them a sturdy sense of independence of character while inculcating contempt for sleaze and corruption. The concept of good governance is almost an obsession with Sri Lankans. No advocate could have asked for a better case to present before the world. Going by the size of the delegation, we have not ignored the homespun wisdom of our farmer either. Given this situation, old hands will know how to place their bets in Geneva...

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